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The Fearcatcher of East Hollywood

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THE FEARCATCHER OF EAST HOLLYWOOD

The fearcatcher of East Hollywood is a tiny, old woman with fat fingers and fatter breasts that dangle between your thighs when she's working to get the fear out. The fear is located right above your penis and she tells you to stop squirming, for God's sake, and just let her work. Her breasts swing like church bells and you try to think churchier thoughts so your junk doesn't embarrass you and out you for the perverted kid you know you are, turned on by some lady gray enough to be your grandma. She's only doing her job, only trying to stop you from being scared of the neighbor's dog who bit you last weekend when Mrs. Lopez came over with enchiladas and Rocco on a leash for the birthday party you didn't invite her son to. Your cousins would've kicked his ass for being a beaner and you might've been forced to join in, even though he was your friend, and that's why you didn't tell Carlos.

The damn dog got you by the ankle and wouldn't let go so when Mrs. Lopez grabbed the terrier by the ass and pulled, shit, she pulled you with it. You fell flat on your back, your cousins pointing and laughing, short, quick yelps, like they were barking. Surprised, Mrs. Lopez let go of Rocco and he rushed towards your face, scraping your arms and fingers with his terrible yellow teeth. You kept screaming gethimoffmegethimoffme, the words garbled because you thought if you opened your mouth up a bit, if you enunciated—something Mrs. Robertson says you have a problem doing, though what the hell does she know, she only speaks English, of course she's going to speak it right, but you, you've got three tongues in your mouth—you worried if you opened your mouth, shit, Rocco would get one of them. It was your mom who finally got the dog off you, grabbing him under his belly and throwing him to the side like he was nothing but a tennis ball. You stopped screaming and your cousins stopped laughing and no one said

nothing and all everyone could hear was Rocco's whimpers. Your mother didn't look but you did when Mrs. Lopez picked up Rocco, cradling him the way your kid sister Vicky does her dolls when she thinks no one is looking, and walked out the door. Your mother threw away the enchiladas and the ceramic plate Mrs. Lopez brought them in before dragging you by the arm into the bathroom where your father kept the alcohol.

Now you're lying on the ground on your back, on the Persian carpet your folks brought over from the old country and still use even though the house you live in came with carpeting—dull and brown, but still, carpeting. There's a towel over your waist while some old fart is all up on you, kneading your skin like she's rolling dough flat enough to make laxmajun, the way your mom does every weekend when your dad is home for dinner and not underneath someone else's car, covered in someone else's motor oil. Your mother is in the same room as you and she's saying she's not looking, that she can't see anything anyway, but you want her gone, you want her out of here, because you know what's going to happen in a few minutes. It's what's happened for the past three days. It's why you're still here, unable to face Rocco, why you're terrified to walk the alleyway behind your house because it seems like everyone in the whole world decided to get a dog last week. It's why you're fat and still growing. No self-control. You're eleven and fat and everything is out of your hands.

And now the fearcatcher's fingers are pressing firmly against you, rubbing the skin above your crotch and below your belly, pinching at the bones of your hips. You just have to close your eyes to get the image of her gray hair and liver spots out, you just have to, and this is when things go wrong, this is when things always go wrong. Without the gray hair and the liver spots, you're thinking it's Armineh from school who's touching you, Armineh with her beautiful black eyes the size of zeytuns, who doesn't play Truth or Dare when everyone else does because she knows only wusses pick Truth and only sluts pick Dare and she's neither. You know this too and you love this about her, but you still wish that one day she plays, picks Truth, tells the

room she likes you, another day picks Dare, kisses you on the mouth. Then you're opening your eyes and the old woman is laughing deeply, winking at your mother and withdrawing her hands while you're scrambling to stand up and cover yourself. Your mom is saying not again, Jesus, she's never going to get the fear out, as you rush to the bathroom before she says something else you're sure will kill you if some damn dog doesn't get you first.

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The fearcatcher got the fear out of your mother when she got into that car accident on the way to work six months back. Some asshole slammed into her passenger-side door when she was making a left, claimed his breaks jammed and he couldn't stop at the red light like everyone knows you're supposed to. The police officer confirmed this after a few days and only gave the lobi a ticket for driving without insurance, though he told your folks that they should sue for a settlement. But they didn't, of course, even though your mom was in the hospital for five days and then afraid to get back in a car for a month, and so lost her job as a pastry chef at Garnik's Bakery. The owners of the business were Armenian, so your parents thought they would've understood and sympathized, given her a break, but they didn't.

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When your dad comes home that evening, he takes a quick look at you and says boy, you smell like a rabbit and look like a bird. He slaps you on the back, his dirty hand leaving a print on your shirt that you try to rub off but you're too fat for your arm to reach so you end up just tapping your shoulder, a pity-pat that you would've mistaken for congratulations if your father ever did a thing like that. Your dad says things like this, stuff that don't make any sense, and despite all the languages you know, you can never figure out what the hell he's saying.

Your mother sets up the dinner table for the second time that day and you join your father for company, for another

serving of pilaf that your mother calls Chinese food because she adds steamed broccoli to it and little packets of soy sauce she saves from the rare times you guys eat at Panda Express or more often at places with names like Little Fat Panda. Your mom looks at you a little funny, a little angry, stares at your stomach so you turn a strange pink, but your dad laughs and he laughs long enough for you to get your right color back, whatever that is.

You took the Standardized Tests last week and there was a question that asked you what you were, so you had to ask Mrs. Robertson if you were White or Other, which seemed like the only possible choices. But she looked at you mean and hard and said stop fooling around and you wanted to throw your No. 2 pencil at her bigass forehead. Instead, you bubbled Other like it was nobody's business, your pencil tearing through the sheet so that Josephine, who sat in front of you, shot you a dirty look and mouthed pendejo. You narrowed your eyes and mouthed you are right back, though you don't know if that's actually true, or what the heck that means anyway, but you know that ain't you, alright, you're no Mexican whatever-that-is.

The pilaf tastes better the second time around but your dad thinks it'll taste even better with a shot of tequila so your mom gets him the bottle. Bring the good kind of glass, he tells her and your mom rolls her eyes. She usually knows what your dad wants from her before he even does. For him too, your dad adds and your mom cocks her head, now in doubt, but despite all her smarts, she's not a man and she's not your father, so that's the end of that.

This isn't the first time you taste alcohol. You have drinks at parties, at baptisms, wakes, at seven, eight, and nine. Your dad will call you from the kid's table and you'll march towards him, shooting a smug look behind you at your cousins. This boy is our future, he'll say. Drink to our future, son. And you do, trying not to make a face, trying not to lose it. You swallow, you smile. My son, the American. You keep smiling.

He doesn't make a big speech when it's just you two at the dinner table now, just says them Mexicans are at least good one for thing and winks at you and you don't know how to re-

spond so you just wink right back. He laughs and you take the shot from his hand and drink it quietly. He downs two more, doesn't offer you any, and you don't ask. The tequila tastes like a thousand razors slicing down your throat. The pilaf is good, kyanks, he tells your mom, slapping her ass when she leans across him to collect the dishes on the table. She blushes. He doesn't. You don't either. You're pretty sure your parents don't have sex, that this flirtation is as far as they get, so you don't mind when they get this far, which isn't very far at all. You're sure that pendeja Josephine must've gotten to second base at least, maybe Carlos even been the one to do it.

Your dad pushes back his chair, goes out for a smoke and your mom guilts you into drying the dishes with those eyes of hers. Ever since the accident, they've been working overtime, making you feel like shit whenever you get in trouble. The eyes are always saying "I almost died and you don't want to clean up your room?" Or "I almost died and you cheated on your god-damn math test?" Even though she says the fear is out of her now, you think some of it is still left, swirling around in the liquidy white part around her pupils, making her look like she's almost about to cry. So you can't help but wonder: how is the fearcatcher going to fix you if she couldn't fix your mom all the way up good first, even though they got the same lady parts?

The fearcatcher first visited your home two weeks after your mom's accident. When she walked through the door, her eyes immediately found yours, sitting at the dining room table eating a bag of chips, and she said in her crackly voice, like there were bumps up and down her throat, I'll be working on you soon enough, boy. She rested her cane against the doorway, wobbled over to the couch, and leaning back with a huge sigh, asked your mother to make her a cup of coffee before they start. No sugar, she called out as your mother hurried to the kitchen to do the ancient woman's bidding. You put down your chips on the table as softly as you could, and holding your breath and staring at the floor, rushed past her toward your bedroom. You shut the door, and then locked it. You knew she was going to do something to your mom but you didn't want to know what.

Now you know. Now, just thinking about how right the old witch was makes you shiver. Only took five months and she was back and you learned firsthand her methods. The fear from your crotch seeping into her fingers, her long laughter at the end of each session, how she looked younger every time you saw her, more terrible. You almost drop the plate in your hand thinking about seeing her again tomorrow. You anxiously look to your mother, but she doesn't notice, lost as she is, often, in her own thoughts. Don't cry, you have the urge to tell her, though she's not. You hate it when girls cry. Vicky doesn't do it often, thank God. You'd never say this to her face but she's tough, tougher than most of your friends, so whenever she lets slip a few, you feel like absolute crap. How were you unable to stop it? Her classmate Bobby from pushing her after a hard game of dodgeball? Or her tears from falling after waking up screaming from a nightmare? What good is it being so damn fat, being so goddamn big, if you can't even protect your little sister?

And how about when Armineh didn't get Student of the Month the first round of the school-year? The whole world knew she was the smartest in the class, but they gave it to that new kid, Ruella, who barely spoke English, but was supergood in Math, like that mattered. But Armineh cried and cried while you all waited in line for Ruella to finish taking pictures with the principal. And when you heard that stupid kid Juan whisper sore-loser, you never wanted to hurt anyone so bad. You were already in trouble, though, for talking when Mrs. Robertson was lecturing that morning so you knew if you tried something, even stuck out your middle finger, Mrs. Robertson would've tried to get you suspended, like you know she's been trying to do ever since school began. You shouldn't have farted during Roll-Call the first day of class, first impressions and all, but you just had to let it go, you had to, there was no way you could've kept it in.

Your mom is now humming to some tune in her head and you're nodding along, wondering what Armineh is doing right now, when your dad comes back in, slamming the door

open and slamming it shut. Eli shuni kak, he says, throwing up his hands. Dog shit again. The fear scrambles from your crotch and settles in your throat. Your mom's putting down the towel and reaching for her shoes. You hurry after them, where for the third day in a row, they'll see dog shit in front of the garage door, smack-dab in the center, as if carefully placed there.

Two days ago, when your dad first saw it, he thought it was human shit, it was so big. Homeless, he had reasoned. And yesterday morning, when another reappeared, coincidence, he explained. But you doubt a bum would shit in the same place three days back to back and from the way your folks are looking at each other, you know they don't think so either. It must be dogs and now, all of a sudden, you're thinking, you're sure, it's Rocco. You tell 'em just that, but your mom rolls her eyes and walks closer to the evidence. Your dad is squatting by its side, hands on his knees, shaking his head.

But of course it's Rocco! It's perfect. A big, brown, F. U. to your family.

It's not Rocco, your dad finally says, standing up. He's too small of an animal, he says, and you want to tell him that size means absolute squat, but he's opening the garage door and unlocking the trunk of his car. He takes a roll of paper towels crammed behind the spare tire and you make a face. Your mom extends her hand to him, asking for the roll with her fingers, but he only shakes his head. Your dad's old school that way, in many ways. The woman cleans up after his shit, no one else's.

You watch as he bends down, grabs the stool with several sheets, scooping it into his paper-hands, and walks it over to the black bin, his arms outstretched in front of him. You are reminded of all those Americans carrying plates of casserole on TV when new neighbors move in. But it's your fucking neighbors who are the problem, aren't they, these Mexicans and their wild dogs. If it's not Carlos, you bet it's another Carlos. Your uncle Armo was right. You guys shouldn't have moved into this neighborhood. The house was cheap, but the quality of residents was cheaper. Those were his words and there was a certain truth to them that even you could pick up. Why didn't your dad listen?

Uncle Armo is your father's brother and last year when you guys started looking for homes to buy, he said take it from him, don't do it. You want to buy a house? Buy a house in Glendale, not anywhere near here, in East Hollywood, where you guys have lived for the past five years in a crummy apartment building with a cement backyard. It's not like you could've even played outside if you wanted, no wonder you're such a whale; the moms hung their laundry out-back and they'd whip you good if you got any of their sheets dirty. The tenants in that building were all Armenian when you guys just arrived, but one by one, they moved out, and the manager had no choice but to offer rooms to the lobis. The Armenians were all in Glendale, Uncle Armo had said, in houses they couldn't afford, but they were with each other.

Your dad didn't mind East Hollywood too much, you could tell. It is as if it is a badge of honor for him, sticking it out, showing the Mexicans that they couldn't run him out of town, like the Azeris did him and his parents when he was a kid growing up in Karabakh. But he hated the thought that you guys were left behind, that you were still living in an apartment as if you had just come to this country. Everyone back home thought your family would've made it big by this time, at least have your own house—you guys at least had that back there. It was a crumbling stone building but it was yours. Now your dad had to ask permission from some gramps to hang photos on the walls, like he was a chump. No, it was time for a move but your dad couldn't bring himself to buy a house he knew would be eventually taken from his hands, so he settled on a house that he knew he could keep.

Your dad's not a risk taker. Though a citizen, he lives in a constant fear of deportation. Until you're eight, you go shopping with your parents, pointing out the treats you want, knowing you won't get any of them. You mostly went to steal a few candies. One time, you're helping your mom load the items onto the black counter. There was a sale for bags of flour at Vons, two for three, with a limit of four bags total per customer so your mom, of course, got all four. The deal is too

good to pass up, she said, especially with the way you eat. Your dad's embarrassed to carry foodstamps so he lets your mom pay the clerk. After loading the groceries inside the car, your mom convinces your dad to go back in, grab four more and pay at a different aisle. No one will know, she says. Besides, no one will care. He gives in, goes inside, and takes you with him. But as he stands ready to hand over the foodstamps, with his head up but eyes down, a pretty blonde worker who looked a little familiar walking by tells the clerk at your register that this man was with a customer who already purchased the flour at the limit. The clerk looks at your dad and shrugs her shoulders. Sorry, sir, you can't, she says, and bends her head down to give you a smile, her sparkling American teeth showing. Everyone in the store is looking at you two, and your dad, for a second, just stands there, just takes it, one hand outstretched, the food-stamps in it shaking, and the bills look to you, then more than ever, fake, false, like he was holding onto Monopoly money. Finally, he moves, leaves the store, red and burning. He pulls at your sweaty hand, dragging you towards the car, opening the passenger-side door and yanking your mother out. He says nothing as he gets behind the wheel and drives off. He leaves you two there in the parking lot of the grocery store, miles from home, stranded. Your mom doesn't say anything, just glances down at you. Well?

You explain the best you can. She cries for most of the walk back. No one ever talks about that day, so you try to forget the color of your mother's face, your mother wiping her nose with the back of the wrist, wiping it on her dress. Strangers not meeting your eyes, the back of their heads, how they all looked the same.

You dad throws the shit away, looks into the darkness of the bin, then closes the lid. He puts his box of tools over it. Vicky is waiting in the living room when you three come back into the house, your father holding his hands in front of him like a zombie, you breathing out with your mouth, trying to get rid of the dog shit smell in the back of the throat, your mother soundless. Where did you guys go, Vicky asks, though you can

tell from the way she's holding the book in her hands, thumb between the pages, she doesn't really care. From the bathroom, your father calls for her. Vicky, he says. Go bring a blank piece of paper and your nicest markers. She hops to it, now alert, pleased she is put to use. You feel a pang of jealousy and confusion, and blame it on the fear not mixing well with the pilaf. Everyone gathers in the living room, your folks sitting on the couch, Vicky on the floor, legs bent under her, and you stand trying to flatten yourself against the wall, peering from the curtained window.

You're going to post a sign. That's what your diplomat father decides. A sign. Write on it, my smart girl, he says, in your best English, something about cleaning up after your dogs. Vicky puts a blue marker between her teeth, and thinks. Make sure your handwriting is nice, really neat, your dad continues. You come to stand over her shoulder and inspect. She writes, in big, loopy letters, evenly spaced apart: Help Keep Our Neighborhood Beautiful. Please Clean Up After Your Dogs. You hum your approval and your dad peers across the table at the foreign words. He doesn't speak English well, but he can read it. Some of the letters you know resemble Russian, some of the words you guess he picked up at the auto-shop.

Looks good, he says and squeezes Vicky's shoulder. Draw some flowers, your mom adds. Your sister frowns. She's not an artist. She looks to you and your raise your palms up and back away. No way you're going to draw some sissyass roses. Your mom gets up with an exaggerated sigh and comes to your sister's side, picking up the skirt of her housedress and kneeling down gracefully. Give me a green marker.

The sign comes out colorful and convincing, friendly. Vicky holds it up over her head and you all applaud. Your dad touches your mother's back and she moves a little closer to him. Everyone puts on their shoes and you grab the tape from your backpack. The whole family stands and commands, a little to the left, a little right, higher, lower, perfect, and you stick the sign in the center of the garage door. You walk back towards the rest and admire what you've accomplished.

Next morning, you're up before everyone else, before the alarm goes off in your parents' bedroom, before your mom has to tap your nose awake. It's not even seven yet. You put on a sweater over the wife-beater you slept in and your Payless sneakers. There's no time for socks. You try to be quiet when you unlock the backdoor and close it behind you. You run towards the gate, open that too, and finally you're there, in the alley, and your eyes immediately go to the ground. Rocks, rocks, a crushed Pepsi bottle, couple of rotten oranges from a neighbor's tree, but yes, yes, no poop, no shit! You want to dance, you want to whoop, you wish Armineh was there, oh, if only the fearcatcher could see you now. But something catches your eye, the sign, the sign a little darker than you remembered it. You move closer.

In bold and angry black, foreign words that cut through you, making it hard to swallow. Go back to Mexico, you fucking wetbacks.

Wetbacks.

You know this word. This word is not you. This word is not your family.

Take a few steps back. This person has got it all wrong. Tear it down before somebody sees. Tear it down quickly. Crumple it into a ball and throw it far away from here. Wake up before your dad tomorrow and for the rest of your life. Clean the shit outside your house.